

OPENING STATEMENT BY GOVERNOR SPIRO T. AGNEW

Conference with Civil Rights and Community Leaders

State Office Building, Baltimore, Maryland

April 11, 1968 - 2 p.m.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

Hard on the heels of tragedy come the assignment of blame and the excuses. I did not invite you here for either purpose. I did not ask you here to recount previous deprivations, nor to hear me enumerate prior attempts to correct them. I did not request your presence to bid for peace with the public dollar.

Look around you and you may notice that every one here is a leader -- and that each leader present has worked his way to the top. If you'll observe, the ready-mix, instantaneous type of leader is not present. The circuit-riding, Hanoi-visiting type of leader is missing from this assembly. The caterwauling, riot-inciting, burn-America-down type of leader is conspicuous by his absence. That is no accident, ladies and gentlemen, it is just good planning. And in the vernacular of today -- "that's what it's all about, baby."

Some weeks ago, a reckless stranger to this City, carrying the credentials of a well-known civil rights organization characterized the Baltimore Police as "enemies of the black man." Some of you here, to your eternal credit, quickly condemned this demagogic proclamation. You condemned it because you recognized immediately that it was an attempt to undermine lawful authority -- the authority under which you were elected and under which you hold your leadership position. You spoke out against it because you knew it was false and was uttered to attract attention and inflame.

When you, who courageously slapped hard at irresponsibility, acted, you did more for civil rights than you realize. But when white leaders openly complimented you for your objective, courageous action, you immediately encountered a storm of censure from parts of the Negro community. The criticism was born of a perverted concept of race loyalty and inflamed by the type of leader who I earlier mentioned is not here today.

And you ran. You met in secret with that demagogue and others like him -- and you agreed, according to published reports that have been not denied, that you would not openly criticize any black spokesman, regardless of the content of his remarks. You were beguiled by the rationalizations of unity; you were intimidated by veiled threats; you were stung by insinuations that you were Mr. Charlie's boy, by epithets like "Uncle Tom." God knows I cannot fault you who spoke out for breaking and running in the face of what appeared to be overwhelming opinion in the Negro community. But actually it was only the opinion of those who depend upon chaos and turmoil for leadership -- those who deliberately were not invited today. It was the opinion of a few, distorted and magnified by the silence of most of you here today.

Now, parts of many of our cities lie in ruins. You need not leave these city limits to verify the destruction and the resulting hardship to our citizens. And you know who the fires burned out just as you know who lit the fires. They were not lit in honor of your great fallen leader. Nor were they lit from an overwhelming sense of frustration and despair. Those fires were kindled at the suggestion and with the instruction of the advocates of violence. It was no accident that one such advocate appeared at eight separate fires before the fire chief could get there.

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The looting and rioting which has engulfed our City during the past several days did not occur by chance. It is no mere coincidence that a national disciple of violence, Mr. Stokely Carmichael, was observed meeting with local black power advocates and known criminals in Baltimore on April 3, 1968 -- three days before the Baltimore riots began.

It is deplorable and a sign of sickness in our society that the lunatic fringes of the black and white communities speak with wide publicity while we, the moderates, remain continuously mute. I cannot believe that the only alternative to white racism is black racism.

Somewhere the objectives of the civil rights movement have been obscured in a surge of emotional oversimplification. Somewhere the goal of equal opportunity has been replaced by the goal of instantaneous economic equality. This country does not guarantee that every man will be successful but only that he will have an equal opportunity to achieve success. I readily admit that this equal opportunity has not always been present for Negroes -- that it is still not totally present for Negroes. But I say that we have come a long way. And I say that the road we have trodden is built with the sweat of the Roy Wilkenses and the Whitney Youngs -- with the spiritual leadership of Dr. Martin Luther King -- and not with violence.

Tell me one constructive achievement that has flowed from the madness of the twin priests of violence, Stokely Carmichael and Rap Brown. They do not build -- they demolish. They are agents of destruction and they will surely destroy us if we do not repudiate them and their philosophies -- along with the white racists such as Joseph Carroll and Connie Lynch -- the American Nazi Party, the John Birchers, and their fellow travelers.

The bitterness of past and present days has been brewed by words like these:

"We have to retaliate for the deaths of our leaders. The execution for those deaths will not be in the court rooms. They're going to be in the streets of the United States of America Black people know that they have to get guns."
-- Stokely Carmichael: Washington, D. C.: April 5, 1968

And

"To hell with the laws of the United States.... Your brothers in the ghettos are going to wake up with matches... if a white man tries to walk over you, kill him ... one match and you can retaliate. Burn, baby, burn... We're going to tear the cities up...."
-- Stokely Carmichael: Miles College: April 4, 1967

And

"Get yourselves some guns. The honky is your enemy. The brothers are now calling Detroit destroyed. You did a good job here." (This City's riot will) "look like a picnic" (after black people unite) "to take their due."

-- Rap Brown: Detroit: August 27, 1967

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And

"Black people are being forced to become both judge and jury. We must arm ourselves with rifles, shotguns, pistols, bow and arrows (with poison arrows), BB guns (with poison BBs) gas, rags, bottles and knives. The only way to get justice in this evil land is to kill the white devil before he kills you."

-- Willard Dixon in a publication "The Black Dispatch,
a Voice of the Black Ghetto"

What possible hope is there for peace in our community if these apostles of anarchy are allowed to spew hatred unchallenged?

If we are to learn from bitter experience, if we are to progress in the battle for equal opportunity, we must plan together and execute those plans together. To do this we must be able to communicate. We cannot communicate and progress if the lunatic fringes are included in the problem-solving team.

I publicly repudiate, condemn and reject all white racists. I call upon you to publicly repudiate, condemn and reject all black racists. This, so far, you have not been willing to do.

I call upon you as Americans to speak out now against the treason and hate of Stokely Carmichael and Rap Brown. If our nation is not to move toward two separate societies -- one white and one black -- you have an obligation, too.

I submit to you that these men and others like them represent a malignancy out of control; that they will lead us to a devastating racial civil war. I submit to you that there can be no winner from such a conflict and that the heaviest losers will be the Negro citizens of America.

It is not too late to return to the true target of the crusade for equality. That target is the elimination of all prejudice against Negroes in America and the provision of an equal opportunity to reach the top. That target will be realized when every man is judged on his own individual merit and only on his merit. Divisiveness and the doctrine of apartheid are impenetrable barriers between us and that target. With your help they can be torn down.

I am sure that these remarks come as somewhat of a surprise to you; that you expected nebulous promises and rationalizations and possibly a light endorsement of the Kerner report. This I could not do. Some hard things needed to be said. The desperate need to confront the problem squarely justified the political risk in saying them.

I need your help, but your help would be of little value if you did not know and subscribe to the objectives for which I seek it. We can do much together -- little apart. Blind militancy must be converted into constructive purpose. This cannot occur so long as you or I condone or cling to racism, black or white. We do not deserve the mantle of leadership unless we are prepared to wear it proudly and, if need be, defiantly.

Above all, I believe you represent the views of the overwhelming majority of Maryland's Negro citizens -- responsible, hard-working, decent people who are as horrified by the events of the past days as you or I. These are the people who will be unjustly victimized by a hardening of attitudes in the responsible, decent white community -- white people who clearly repudiated racism in the 1966 election -- white people who could normally be expected to endorse the 1967 open housing legislation on referendum this November.

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My greatest fear is this polarization of attitudes as an aftermath of violence. Next I fear that we cannot endure continuous tension over the next months -- that our community cannot live in constant fear that any irrational provocation may cause racial war.

Together we must work first to prevent polarization and second to reduce tension. I will need your vision and your voice. Now as never before your articulate, responsible leadership is needed. I am prepared to do whatever I can to aid the innocent victims of last weekend's rampage, to alleviate clear abuses and to enlarge opportunity within the inner city.

We must do this -- as I said in my report to the people last Sunday night -- "not out of fear of reprisal but out of certain faith that it is right."

So let us begin to rebuild now -- to rebuild our city and to rebuild the image of Baltimore. Let us work together -- not as black and white -- but as responsible citizens of Maryland who uphold the law; as concerned citizens who are united in their dedication to eliminate prejudice and poverty or any conditions which create hopelessness and despair.

Let us promptly and publicly renounce any who counsel or condone violence. Let us acknowledge that we have a real stake in our society. Let us proudly acclaim our patriotism and our recognition that no nation in the world offers such opportunity. The fiction that Negroes lack any opportunity in this country is dispelled by the status of those of you in this room.

As Thomas Jefferson said, nearly two centuries ago, "With all the imperfections of our present government, it is without comparison the best existing, or that ever did exist."

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